

Constant Conversion:
The Myth of Transfiguration

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In 1957 a collection of essays by the French intellectual Roland Barthes was published as *Mythologies*. In the preface essay, “Le Mythe aujourd’hui,” Barthes underscores the idea that objects and events always signify more than themselves, and are always caught up in systems of representation which add meaning to them. These systems, in which things can have meaning, are myths. Barthes explores many myths that structure meaning making in post-war France, exposing them as systems that both conceal and reveal knowledge.¹ If it is the case that all people structure and give meaning to their lives through myths, what are the myths I use now to structure my life?

According to the novelist Louise Erdrich the myth by which we structure our life is transfiguration. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich tells the story of the transfiguration of Agnes DeWitt, an innocent Swabian girl. Agnes enters the convent as Sister Cecilia in 1910, but a mere two years later, after experiencing events beyond what she could have ever imagined, the same woman finds herself saved from a flood on the banks of the swollen Red River and takes up the guise of Father Damien Modeste and assumes his mission to the Ojibwe. The life she chose for herself transformed her and led her in directions she did not anticipate, further transforming Agnes into Father Damien.

While Sister Cecilia was living in the convent she understood God to be a devoted lover, but Cecilia did not parallel this devotion. “In her music Sister Cecilia explored profound emotions. Her phrasing described her faith and doubt, her passion as the bride of Christ, her loneliness, shame, ultimate redemption.”² She understood herself as a person having made an unconditional promise to God to live a life of music, teaching,

¹ Roland Barthes. *Mythologies* translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday, 1973.

² Louise Erdrich. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. New York: Perennial, 2002. Pg. 14.

and prayer. Her doubt was as strong as her faith and she experienced loneliness more profoundly than any loving embrace of Christ. “She was one who believed without seeing, felt spiritual emotion without experience of its source, kept an orderly faith and hap-hazard observance without the deepest marks of conviction.”³ Leaving the convent, Agnes felt ashamed at having betrayed God, unaware that Christ would redeem her from the flood. Agnes later writes, “Through my years my love and wonder have steadily increased. Having met Him just that once, having known Him in a man’s body, how could I not love Him until death? How could I not follow Him?” The salvation she experienced left Agnes transformed. She was no longer a bride of Christ because her religious superior told her as much; Agnes was now the bride of Christ because Christ had saved her and she loved him for that. In the flood Agnes had lost everything – her house, her piano, the remnants of her life that remained after the loss of Berndt. She lived the rest of her days in steadfast and convicted love and devotion; she knew the warm embrace of a Christ who pulled her from despair to new life. Agnes had been transformed by her encounter with God, an encounter that profoundly shaped the further transformative encounters she was to have with those to whom she brought the Gospel.

The conversion experience of Agnes was one in which she crossed over from an understanding of God in legal or intellectual terms to a God who saves and personally drives one forward in faith. This had repercussions for the manner in which she conducted her missions. Father Damien went to the Ojibwe and was determined to bring Christ to them, but in a personal manner. Father Damien went to visit those people in his charge and engaged in very personal and friendly relations with even those such as Nanapush who did not embrace Christianity. In this encounter with the Ojibwe, Father

³ Erdrich, pg. 42.

Damien came to a much fuller appreciation of his own nature. This reaches a climax at what may be seen as Damien's conversion to the Ojibwe spiritual way, inaugurated by his joining Nanapush and others in the sweat lodge. "The way Damien understood it, he was to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg. Not the other way around."⁴ From the Ojibwe Damien learned to be able to accept himself, to feel a sense of ease with himself and his surroundings. "Father Damien loved not only the people but also the very thingness of the world."⁵ This ability of Father Damien to add the Ojibwe spiritual methods to his repertoire of ways to relate to God is directly linked to the saving act Agnes had experienced many years before. Christ had pulled her out of the river, reaffirmed his marriage of faith to her, and set her on a mission. This mission did not include a renunciation of her previous life; her mission was rather a fulfillment of the transformation resulting from Agnes' former life. Thus, as Father Damien, Agnes was predisposed to add to her religious experiences, rather than replace them.

The experiences of Agnes DeWitt as Father Damien offer a unique way to consider the powerful effect such encounters, both with God and with others, can have on a person. Agnes' experience is indicative of us all: we are liminal beings, moving between two worlds, while at the same time being transformed and transforming the worlds in which we live. We are living in the myth of transfiguration; we make choices in our lives, as if we can understand where they will lead us. In the end, however, we are transformed by our experiences and led in different directions altogether. Our task then is twofold. First, we must have the humility to admit we do not know the consequences

⁴ Erdrich, pg. 214.

⁵ Erdrich, pg. 215.

of all our action and decisions, “for even the very wise cannot see all ends.”⁶ Second, we are called to accept our past decisions, not regretting or seeking to change what cannot be altered, welcome the uncertainty resulting from our actions, and be able to create meaning from our experiences in this myth of transfiguration. This type of acceptance was made famous in the words penned by Dag Hammarskjold in his journal: “For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes.”

My life, too, has been lived out through transfigurations. Decisions I have made have led to consequences I could never have imagined. At the time, many of these seemed problematic, but when recollected in tranquility, I have been able to create a coherent narrative of my life and the transfigurations that have been part and parcel of it.

I was born in 1979 in the southern California city of Escondido, which lies about 30 miles north of San Diego. My father had been born and raised on a farm in Escondido, and many of his ancestors have been in Escondido for several generations. As an equipment mechanic, my father supported my mother, my younger sister, and me.

This is the background in which I was raised; it was from my parents and some excellent elementary school teachers that I gained a profound interest in learning. My parents wanted what all parents want for their children, namely for them to succeed. Both of my parents were actively involved in my education and from a very early age I showed an interest in scientific matters. I received my first telescope, microscope, computer, and set of scientific encyclopedia and greatly enjoyed working with them. My father was always doing projects, like repairing and restoring his classic cars, maintaining our house and yard, and I was eager to help in these tasks. Naturally what grew out of this was an interest in engineering sciences. I worked with a group in middle and high

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien. *Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994. Gandalf to Frodo, pg. 85.

schools developing various vehicles for science competitions, non-combustion rockets, bridges, and the like. I was incredibly successful in these endeavors and dreamed from about seventh grade that I would attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Through high school, despite enjoying my literature courses, it was my advanced science courses and my academic competitions that really moved me.

There was, however, something in me that pulled in another direction. I was very committed to my church and wanted to serve the Church in some capacity. Despite opposition from some of the parents of students in the parish school, I served as an altar server ever since I had been invited by my Catechism instructor in fourth grade. I taught religious education for many years. I volunteered in many capacities, but hospice made the biggest impact on me. During these high school years, I became keenly aware of the presence of other religious groups and began to feel the need to really deeply understand and defend my own faith, mostly against some of my best friends, whom I describe as “the Mormon, the UCC gone anti-institutional church, and the misanthrope.” This situation encouraged me to identify ever more closely with my faith and to lean on God for support in many matters. Despite leaning on the Lord, I was really of the mind that my accomplishments were mine alone; my parents, my teachers and my God had helped, but it was really my doing. Nevertheless I continued to pursue my service to others and considered the priesthood, although I never shared that with anyone during those years. I was drawn to the Dominicans, whose appreciation of study as a form of devotion squared well with me. When it came time for me to select a university, the choices were difficult: I visited MIT and it was as though all the dreams I had been dreaming since seventh grade were fanciful, as no existing place could have been as glorious as I pictured it.

Moving towards the biological sciences, and with nearly any choice possible before me, I decided to attend the University of California, San Diego.

I began my studies in bioengineering and became active in the campus ministry program there, at that time under the direction of two Paulist priests. During my first year I continued my service work, volunteering among AIDS patients in downtown San Diego, but also worked in a bioengineering lab. I began to feel a tremendous distaste for the lab in which I was working and felt that I could not possibly spend my whole life working in such an environment. I did not know what I wanted to do, but I knew that was not it. I had taken several seminar style courses, where I was able to hear from various professors what type of research they did. I was particularly interested in what the Anthropologists were up to, having never heard of this discipline before. I enrolled in a seminar done by many of the Anthropology faculty and I was hooked. These people thought in a way that I liked and they were interested in what mattered most: people and their culture. This was my first big transfiguration. Like Agnes who had been rescued from the river, I felt as though I had found my home. And through all the uncertainty of where it would lead, I had the support of my parents who, when I informed them of my switch asked, “What is Anthropology? Are there any jobs in it?” When I told them the answer to the latter, my mother said, “That’s okay, whatever makes you happy.” Nobody knew where I would end up, but I followed my heart’s desire.

At this time I began sharing with some of my friends that I was interested in becoming a priest. Several of my Catholic suitemates—a Korean, two Filipinos, and a Mexican—all supported me in that direction. I had been in touch with the director of vocations at the Dominican priory, when I learned that the Dominicans would be taking over the

campus ministry at UCSD next fall. Unlike many members of the community who were sad to see the Paulists leave and feared “the inquisitors,” I was sure that this could not have been coincidental; God had intended for this to happen and was leading me in the direction I had selected for myself. I shared my plan with my parents, who were at first a little slow to come onboard, sad that they would not have any grandchildren to carry on the family name. It was during this time, that I began to pay close attention to the lyrics of a song I had long admired:

If you want, then start to laugh
If you must, then start to cry
Be yourself don't hide
Just believe in destiny
Don't care what people say
Just follow your own way
Don't give up and use the chance
To return to innocence⁷

So, when I started my second year at UCSD, I was an eager member of the Student Ministry team, I welcomed the Dominicans with open arms, and I continued to pray hard for some sign that God did really intend for me to enter the priesthood. That sign came in the most unexpected form early in my second year.

Her name was Michelle and she and I are now happily married. The uncertainty that I had felt in my discernment was countered by the most certainty I have ever had. I was certain I was supposed to be with her and she with me. This is not to say, however, that I accepted God’s plan in Michelle and set aside my plan to become a priest all too easily. In fact, I distinctly remember talking with the vocations director at the diocese, who had invited me to meet with him, about the possibility of becoming an Eastern Rite Catholic priest. I did not receive too much support on that matter. Thus was effected the most profound transformation of my life, in many respects. I gladly laid aside what I had pre-

⁷ Enigma. “The Return to Innocence” on *The Cross of Changes*. London: Virgin Records, 1994.

planned for my life and welcomed the unexpected gift that I had been given. Through Michelle I have learned so much more about loving and being loved than I could ever have imaged possible. We have continued to walk together towards the Lord, being there to support one another whenever the going gets tough. In the course of less than three years I had been transformed from a career-minded adolescent who entertained ideas of becoming a priest, to a young man who knew what it was like to experience loving and being loved. Just as Agnes had been transformed by learning what love was, not through her time in the convent, but in the intimacies she felt in performing Chopin and later in the arms of Berndt, I too had been transformed by a love in another, together with Christ.

The three remaining years of college were wonderful; I had found something certain on which I could rely, a person with whom I could walk hand-in-hand through all of life, and share experiences of many wonderful things. We spent our third college year in Europe, but quite far apart.⁸ This year was most of the difficult yet rewarding personal experiences I have and probably ever will have. Being apart from Michelle, whom I had grown so close to over the previous year, was a struggle. We were able to meet for our breaks, in order to be with one another and to travel around Europe. Despite this, however, not having one another to lean on through the day-to-day challenges of adjusting to a new culture at times felt as though I wanted to abandon the whole idea and just go live in Ireland with Michelle while she finished up her classes. In the end, however, we helped one another through the most difficult periods and we both would not have changed our situations even if we could. It was while we were abroad that Michelle and I were engaged to one another. Being apart, knowing the difficulties we

⁸ I was at the Københavns Universitet in Copenhagen, Denmark and Michelle was at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

had endured, and how we pined to be with one another reconfirmed the certainty we had about our life path being together, whatever that might entail.

After we graduated and married, Michelle and I moved to South Bend so that I could begin liturgical studies at Notre Dame. I had expressed an interest in deepening my faith and broadening my knowledge and the campus ministry at UCSD supported me in searching for this. With my anthropological background, my interest in liturgy, and the excellent funding, Notre Dame was the obvious choice. Michelle was uncertain what she would be able to do, but knew that something would work out. In fact it has been excellent. Michelle was able to work in a Biochemistry lab on campus, where she has been able to learn a great deal of techniques and principles, as well as being included in at least one publication. Placing our trust in God and walking forward together worked out well. Reflecting on this, I came to realize how far I had come since my high school days. No longer was I pleased with myself for what I had accomplished, giving a nod of thanks to God; no, now I realized that God had put all the pieces in order and I had only to accept the wonderful gifts poured out on us. Now as my time as a masters student at Notre Dame comes to close, Michelle and I have much more to look forward to.

Having been transfigured into more confident and skilled persons in our respective fields, Michelle and I decided to continue onto doctoral programs, both applying for various different programs, placing our trust that something would work out for the best; we did not know what that would entail, but we knew it would come through. Through a tumultuous decision making process, we have been fortunate to be received back to

UCSD.⁹ Beginning next fall we will move back to San Diego, hopefully find some place to live, and continue on this our path of life, hand-in-hand as always.

The myth by which we live, that system of meaning making that has allowed me to create a coherent narrative of my life is that of transfiguration. My experience is like that Agnes, although I have not changed my name at each of my major transformations; I have been led in directions I could never have thought possible, directions that have all worked out for the best. It is with the utmost sincerity that I can look back at the narrative of my life, shaped as it is by transformations, and say “Thanks.” Moreover, I can look forward into the uncertainty before me, certain however that I will be walking hand-in-hand with Michelle on this journey of life towards the ineffable one, and say “Yes.” I have been transfigured and doubtless I will continue to be transfigured by the one who leads us and guides us, kindling our heart and illumining our soul, ever patient as we strive to change our willfulness into willingness.

⁹ I will be starting a doctoral program in socio-cultural Anthropology, hoping to work among the Chaldean Catholic community in San Diego. Michelle will be starting at the top-ranked doctoral program in Biomedical Sciences.